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ABSTRACT

Steps must be taken to upset the academic equilibrium that sustains the dearth of humanities in community college curricula. Accommodation to institutional and societal factors have forced an emphasis on practical rather than liberal arts courses, and provided for an incomplete curriculum that does not help the student meet humanistic educational goals. A distinction should be made between the repetitive and futile, though necessary, nature of a "job" and the creative, fulfilling nature of "work." Additionally, curriculum planning should be directed toward preparing students for living as well as livelihoods. Implementation of these directions can be achieved by using the language of the humanities, i.e., the expression of "purposiveness and drama," as opposed to the factual objectivity of scientific language, in improving existing courses and creating new ones. Within the classroom, emphasis on the distinction between "job" and "work" provides a common goal for both students and teachers, and thus prevents student disinterest and faculty discouragement. To help community college teachers meet the challenges that face them, they should be rewarded for outside, "entrepreneurial" work such as writing or painting; they should be given opportunities for "creative disengagement" from their college assignments; and they should be evaluated in terms broader than the number of hours spent in the classroom. (JP)

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WORK, JOBS, AND THE LANGUAGE OF THE HUMANITIES

by

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In the midst of all the uncertainties, frustrations, and pessimism surrounding the humanities, it is time for an encouraging word. The encouraging word is that there are ways to build the humanities into community college curricula or to enhance their status where they already exist. The time is right for putting the ways to work. The purpose of this essay is to suggest starting points for so doing.

To get to the point quickly, we must begin by stating some self-evident truths, expressed here as "givens," regarding the purposes of education and the context in which these purposes are pursued in community colleges.

I regard it as a given, first, that a curriculum or degree program is unbalanced and incomplete if it does not help students: a) to find and make sense out of relationships between their life, work, and jobs (more later on the distinction between work and jobs); b) to see themselves and their society from different angles, different times, different places, and through different eyes; c) to expand and refine their ability to read, write, and speak; d) to reflect on the meaning of their doings, habits, and beliefs; and e) to respond with both reason and feeling to their natural and man-made environments. These five purposes of education, to which others can be added, are specifically related to the humanities.[1]

Second, I regard it as a given that most curricula and degree programs in community colleges are unbalanced and incomplete. This condition derives from

the paradox that doing the wrong thing is sometimes also the right thing, or so it seems; from the nature of a two-year institution (how much can you do in 64 hours?); from the apparent desires of society for learning to show immediate and tangible utility; from the transfer of training in job skills from business and industry to colleges; and from the successful lobbying efforts of those benefiting from this transfer, especially from the funding formulas they have devised.

Third, I consider it as a given that educational pendulums swing. In recent years the swing has been from liberal education to practical education. It may swing back, but we have no assurance that it will. The forces working against a return swing seem to be stiffening in place. In a situation like this, there is more to our duty than to merely keep the ideal of liberal education alive. We have a duty to strengthen it by putting it to work.

And finally, I take it as a given that although it is unwise to treat liberal education (learning for a lifetime) and practical education (with its emphasis on immediacy of application of knowledge and skills) as naturally exclusive alternatives, we must acknowledge that in many curricula and programs liberal education is already the excluded alternative. Advocates of practical education are often the first to acknowledge this exclusion and to regret its consequences. They recognize, as do humanists, that if there is richness in a balance between liberal education and practical education, many curricula--many institutions--are poverty stricken.

Poverty stricken is a strong term, but using it enables us to make an essential point more forcefully. In The Nature of Mass Poverty, John Kenneth Galbraith argues that the remedies the United States prescribed for dealing with poverty around the world after the Second World War failed to take into account what he calls the "equilibrium of poverty." This is a condition that grows out of absence of aspiration; it shows itself in accommodation to things as they

are. Attacking mass poverty, he says, requires enlarging the number of people refusing accommodation, thus upsetting the equilibrium of poverty. Although it is interesting to note that Galbraith asserts that education offers the best way for breaking accommodation and that "basic education must always take precedence over technical or sophisticated instruction directly related to economic performance," that is not the main reason for pointing to his book here.[2]

The main reason for doing so is to draw a parallel: poverty in community college curricula will continue until the equilibrium that sustains it is upset, until accommodation to it is overcome. Some specific things can be done to upset the equilibrium of poverty. I shall outline here two starting points for doing them, the first laying the groundwork for the second. I shall also propose some positive steps for helping community college faculties break the dispirited accommodation that sustains the equilibrium of poverty.

Of the many forces contributing to the equilibrium of curricular poverty in community colleges, indeed, in all of higher education, concern for jobs is surely the most visible one. And understandably so. For most of us, living is impossible without a livelihood, and skills for a livelihood must be acquired somewhere and somehow. Given the panicky notion that options for choice of livelihood have diminished, it is natural, though ironic, to believe that specialized preparation for one particular kind of livelihood will ensure employment. Thus we speak of "entry-level job skills," immediately applicable, and we think of schools and colleges as the place to acquire them.

Jobs. That is what colleges have come to be about, even though, as W.E.B. DuBois wrote three-quarters of a century ago, "the true college will ever have one goal--not to earn meat, but to know the end and aim of that life which the meat nourishes."[3] To understand what that means, one must draw a distinction

between earning meat--in a job--and knowing the end and aim of life--one's work. And careful drawing of that distinction is one starting point for finding a new balance between liberal education and practical education.

What is the distinction? As Thomas F. Green defines it in Work Leisure and the American Schools, the labor of a job is something that must be repeated and repeated and repeated. As soon as it is done, it must be done again. The job is the food-gathering side of human existence. Necessity and futility are its fundamental and interconnected features. Green points out that no one is free whose life is totally absorbed in the performance of labor in a job.

Work is the artisan side of human existence. Work, as a verb, is an activity; as a noun it is the completed result of that activity. We do not speak of a "life's job;" to refer to a "life's work" is quite natural, for our lives are devoted to our work.[4]

It is work so understood, then, that encourages the development of creative powers, allows the human spirit to roam, gives play to imagination, and pushes humankind to new horizons. Most people like their work. A great many do not like their jobs. They see their jobs as necessary for providing the resources for doing their work.

To say that is neither to ascribe a superiority to work over jobs nor to deny the possibility, even the likelihood, that work and job can be one and the same thing, as it is for many. Those parts of a job that give one a sense of fulfillment are clearly one's work. But many jobs, even those for which skills are acquired in colleges, are essentially labor rather than work.

The distinction between work and jobs drawn here, sketchy and incomplete though it is, suggests a starting point for discussion by curriculum committees that are in earnest about preparing students in their institutions for living as well as for livelihoods.

Suppose the distinction is drawn. Suppose a commitment is made to education for work as well as for jobs. Then what? Add a course? Revise existing courses? Develop something interdisciplinary? Revamp curricula? However desirable any or all of these options might be--and they ought to be tried--they are easier to talk about than to put into effect. Constraints imposed by time, state requirements, licensing authorities, specialized accrediting agencies, and tradition stand in the way of structural changes that appear to be radical or substantial.

To find a direction for effective action in the face of these constraints, let us ask what lies in common among the purposes of education listed earlier (to help students find and make sense out of relationships between their life, work and jobs; see themselves and their society from different perspectives; expand and refine communication skills; explore the meaning of their doings, habits, and beliefs; and respond with both reason and feeling to their environments). What they have in common is their language. It is what philosopher Albert William Levi calls the language of the "humanistic complex," which he distinguishes from the "scientific chain of meaning." It is the language of imagination, in contrast to the language of understanding. In the humanistic complex Levi lists terms like: reality and appearance, illusion, destiny, free will, fortune, fate, drama, tragedy, happiness, and peace. The scientific chain of meaning employs such terms as: true and false propositions, error, scientific law, causality, chance, prediction, and fact.

"There is an obvious and crucial difference," Levi writes, "between the language of understanding and the language of imagination, and yet there is a paradoxical similarity between them also. The scientist is concerned with the truth and falsity of propositions, the poet with the appearances and realities of the world, and so the problem which the one deals with under the rubric of

'error' the other must consider under the heading of 'illusion.'" The essential characteristic of the terms of the scientific chain of meaning is "their reference to objectivity and factuality;" of those in the humanistic complex it is "their function as vehicles for the expression of purposiveness and drama."[5]

Levi's distinction is perhaps overdrawn. That both scientists and humanists should take issue with it is predictable, especially as it is abbreviated here.[6] But taken suggestively, it opens the way for fruitful discussions.

Imagine a curriculum committee at work. Its assignment: to find ways to upset the imbalance in the college's curricula. Assume that the purposes of education outlined at the beginning of this essay have been adapted into acceptable form without being stripped of their meaning. Assume further that distinctions between work and job similar to those drawn here have found support. The committee might then begin to compile a list of terms under the heading, "the language of the humanities." Levi's list provides a start. Added to it might be: purpose, pleasure, hope, despair, fear, form, harmony, unity, coherence, balance, beauty, feeling, experience, existence, transcendence, image, symbol, myth, morality, value, taste, freedom, equality, welfare, justice, irony, right, wrong, good, evil, artificiality, style, victory, defeat, birth, death, self, other, . . . and so on.

Is this a language that community college students do not need to learn? Hardly! How can they be helped to learn it? Can they learn it without reading, writing, and conversing? Can they learn it without studying literature, art, music, history, and philosophy? Obviously, courses in all these fields in all curricula would be out of the question. So the issue turns: How can the language of the humanities be infused into existing courses? What new courses, crossing disciplinary lines, can help students learn the language of the humanities? To turn the issue full circle: How can the language of the humanities

That is implicit in the purposes of education be used in explicit ways to accomplish these purposes?

At an early stage in the preparation of this essay, I thought it would be possible to describe some of the revision and reform efforts undertaken by persons and groups who have refused to accommodate themselves to curricula and programs that have slighted humanities.[7] When I found that I could not do justice to these efforts in a brief essay, I thought that I could at least call attention to features they hold in common. That I have done. They are all built on the language of humanities illustrated in the exercise above. In fact, many of the terms I have listed in the exercise were gleaned from published materials flowing from specific curriculum reform efforts in community colleges. Or, we might say, from the evidence of refusals to accommodate to the equilibrium of poverty.

Admittedly, it is not hard for committees to draw distinctions between work and jobs, as I have suggested they should do, and to apply the distinctions to curricular questions. Nor is it hard to find ways of enriching a college's offerings with the language of the humanities. Planning is easy. The real difficulty comes in translating effective work by individuals and committees into effective work in classrooms.

I gained an insight into this difficulty at a poetry reading by Howard Nemerov. In commenting on his poem, "The Little Aircraft," he remarked that there is really nothing at all to flying an airplane. The hard part, he said, lies in understanding what the air traffice controller is saying: "The only way you can make sense out of what he says is to know what he is going to say." To which he added, "That has a lot in common with teaching and poetry, doesn't it?"

Perhaps the yawning indifference that so many students bring into humanities

classrooms derives from their bewilderment over what we as traffic controllers are saying. Whatever the causes, their lack of perspective and their inability to integrate the various aspects of their lives, express themselves clearly, reflect on the connectedness of things, or respond to environmental stimuli compound the problems caused by a want of basic learning skills and work schedules that permit little time for thought and study. No wonder many of them become academic shoplifters, hoping to sneak into the classroom and make off with three credits without anyone noticing them. And no wonder that even, or perhaps especially, the most gifted and dedicated teachers find their spirits and endurance tested so profoundly. No wonder accommodation to curricular poverty is widespread. It is more than a mere excuse to claim, as many faculty members do, that a new curriculum is no cure for problems caused by unreachable students.

In referring to unreachable students, the indifferent and the academically disabled, I do not mean to imply that there are no exceptions or bright spots in our student constituencies or that the cause is hopeless for the disabled and the indifferent. Indeed, it is wrong in many instances to speak of disabled students; perhaps we should call them "unpracticed." Helping them gain practice can be rewarding. The satisfaction that comes, for example, from reading an acceptable review of the first book a 32-year-old man ever read, as happened to me last Spring, offsets the disappointment caused by a dozen unacceptable student papers. Case studies of success among students like this one would no doubt reveal that there are many opportunities for using the content of the humanities in remedial efforts with the unpracticed; the teacher's task is to find ways to seize them and make the most of them.

But even success stories are not sufficient to turn back faculty discouragement and discontentment. The roots of the problem lie in the gap between the interests and needs of students and teachers. It is not a new problem; in fact,

Woodrow Wilson spelled it out succinctly nearly 100 years ago when he was a young teacher at Bryn Mawr:

> I have devoted myself to a literary life, but I do not see how a literary life can be built up on foundations of undergraduate instruction. That instruction compels one to live with the commonplace, the A.B.C. of every subject, to dwell upon these with an emphasis and invention altogether disproportionate to their weight and importance; it keeps one on the dusty, century-travelled highroads of every subject, from which one gets no outlooks except those that are catalogued and vulgarized in every guide-book. One gets weary plodding and yet grows habituated to it and finds all excursions aside more and more difficult. What is a fellow to do? How is he to earn bread and at the same time find leisure, and (in the toils of such a routine) disposition of mind for thoughts entirely detached from and elevated high above the topics of his trade?[8]

The answers to the questions Wilson asked, and that many of us in the humanities are asking with more intensity today, are not easy to find. But looking for them puts us in a common quest with students. The quest might well begin with an attempt to draw a distinction between our own work and our jobs. Our work is to do humanities. Some of our work is done in classrooms. Some of what we do in classrooms and in tasks related to classrooms is simply labor, a job. Grading bluebooks, for example.

When our work is wrapped up entirely in our job and our job turns sour, so do we. If we are wise enough to recognize this and have energy enough to do something about it, we can carry on our work with good spirit despite the discouragements that come in our jobs. At the same time, we come to a closer understanding of our students, whose work and jobs are very likely separated more widely from one another than ours are.

Sensitive administrators can help faculty members meet the challenges that face them. For one thing, they can encourage the kind of entrepreneurship in teaching that enables teachers to bring their work into their classrooms and keep it in close harmony with their jobs. For another, they can find ways of rewarding productive entrepreneurial work done apart from the performance of assigned

labor. Think of the salutary effects it would have on their teaching if faculty members were encouraged to do what their work compels them to do: to write, to paint, to act, to play, or to compose, for example. And think of the price we pay for continuing the traditon of exempting community college teachers from any obligation to do these things.

Periodically, administrators can provide teachers with opportunities for what might be called "creative disengagement" from part of their college assignments, allowing them to devote time and energy to such things as local historical societies, museums, or community artists' and writers' groups. Specifically along this line, they can provide released time for preparing proposals for grants from the State Humanities Committees and administering them in their communities. Who is better poised to work with community groups--from the curious to the incarcerated to the aged--than faculty members in community colleges? Creative disengagement from regular duties to take on exceptional ones is surely a desirable alternative to the cynical detachment that eventually leads faculty members to become realtors, antique dealers, or fast-food franchisers in their moonlight hours. Or to live by what has been dubbed the "Russian work ethic"--you pretend you're paying me a decent day's wage and I'll pretend I'm giving you a decent day's work.

There is more that administrators can do. They can resist the temptation to apply the term "accountability" in the worst of ways: by counting minutes spent in classrooms and hours spent in offices, while ignoring virtually everything else faculty members do, simply because these are the most countable. They can recognize that faculty members' needs change as they progress through their careers and that faculty development programs that do not attempt to match individual and institutional needs are useless.[9]

Doing these things will not insure that accommodation to the equilibrium of

poverty will be overcome, but they will serve to make it less comfortable. And doing them will free administrators to call attention to the job that faculty members must do, even if it does not coincide at the moment with their work, and to demand that it be done professionally.

Much unfinished business remains. We might consider, if space allowed, such things as the contrast between the kind of reflecting the humanities encourage and the narcissistic self-contemplation that characterizes faddish pop-psych movements. The one is designed to transplant one from today's culture to the many and varied cultures of other times and places and to see one's doings in larger contexts; the other encourages shrinking the world around the "me."

We might examine the job-applicable benefits of studying the humanities. We might look into the larger question of the inherent value of humanities studies in contrast to their utilitarian value. The ties that must exist between the arts and the sciences in a liberal education deserve to be probed.

And think of what we could do if we were to take up moral and public policy questions relating to the humanities. How do the humanities help nursing students deal with issues of bio-medical ethics; or engineering students with problems of the environment; or criminal justice students, many of them policemen, with questions of conflict in society; or agriculture students on matters of preservation and use of resources?

These questions are particularly important in community colleges because of the way these colleges are used by those who attend them. The college years have traditionally been the years of transition between study and job. The study is preparation; the job comes later. Not so for many community college students. They reach the crossroads between study and job every day. For others, the job is not more than a year or two away. All of them face questions of work and job daily.

In light of these considerations and those presented earlier in this essay, curricular poverty is indefensible. The language of the humanities is waiting to be spoken.

NOTES

1. Persons looking for a working definition of the humanities will find the one provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities to be useful: "The humanities are above all a way of thinking, a dimension of learning. The subjects of the humanities range from the study of great texts to the analysis of contemporary problems; the methods of the humanities are both those of particular disciplines and of broader interdisciplinary inquiry.

   "According to the Act of Congress which established the Endowment, the humanities include, but are not limited to: history, philosophy, languages, linguistics, literature, archaeology, jurisprudence, history and criticism of the arts, ethics, comparative religion, and those aspects of the social sciences employing historical or philosophical approaches. This last category includes political theory, international relations, and other subjects primarily concerned with questions of quality and value rather than methodologies."

2. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979).

3. The Souls of Black Folk (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1961), p. 70. (Originally published in 1903.)

4. (New York: Random House, 1968).

5. Literature, Philosophy and the Imagination (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), pp. 44-49.

6. What is more elegantly imaginative, scientists might ask, than higher mathematics or nuclear physics? And is history an art or a science? C.V. Wedgwood: "Or is it as some have argued a hybrid between the two? The best answer is to turn the question inside out. All sciences are devoted to the quest for truth; truth can neither be apprehended nor communicated without art. History therefore is an art, like all other sciences." The Sense of the Past (New York: Collier Books, 1967), p. 96.

7. I had intended to describe, for example, the "Contemporary Course in the Humanities" developed by the City Colleges of Chicago, Coast Community College, and Miami-Dade; to call attention to the work done at Valencia Community College; to explain how Santa Fe Community College gave birth to an imaginative introductory course in the humanities and how Paris Junior College in Texas is struggling against the odds to find a toehold for the humanities in its various occupational curricula; and to point to the steps taken in the humanities at Mohawk Valley Community College. The National

Endowment for the Humanities has played an important part in several of these efforts and in many others where individuals and groups resisting accommodation have sought assistance.

Also deserving attention is a new textbook by two community college teachers. The Art of Being Human: The Humanities as a Technique for Living, by Richard Paul Janaro and Thelma C. Altschuler (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), gives the humanities some interesting twists.

8. From the private unpublished journal of Woodrow Wilson, October 20, 1887. The journal is in the Library of Congress.

9. Adaptable models for faculty development programs are found in Edgar H. Schein, Career Dynamics: Matching Individual and Organizational Needs (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1978).

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